

A junior at Commonwealth Connections Academy in Pennsylvania uses a microphone to respond to the teacher's questions and takes part in classroom discussions. Connections Academy is among a growing number of virtual schools nationwide offering full-time online courses.

# Logging On to Learn

BY KEVIN BUTLER

Full-time virtual schools offer a new model of instruction.

**A** CLASSROOM LECTURE at Capistrano Connections Academy in Southern California involves booting up the home computer, logging on to a Web site, and observing a teacher conducting a PowerPoint presentation of that day's lesson entirely online. Through microphone headsets, students can watch on their home computers, respond to the teacher's questions, and take part in classroom discussions. "It's very interactive," says Elizabeth Hall, whose fifth-grade daughter is enrolled in the school.

Capistrano Connections Academy, a charter school authorized by the Capis-

rano Unified School District and managed by Connections Academy, is among a growing number of virtual schools offering full-time programs in which all courses are taken online. Now, 24 states and the District of Columbia offer full-time online schools to students.

Experts are studying whether full-time virtual schools are effective academically and whether they offer students sufficient social opportunities. Some question if they are receiving more than their fair share of state funding. If virtual schools get more popular, drawing students away from districts, it could affect those districts' bottom lines.

## Nuts and Bolts

According to the 2009 edition of the "Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning" report, which annually tracks trends of online schools nationwide, many full-time virtual schools are charter schools, which are authorized and overseen by state or local authorities. Like other charters, the virtual charters operate largely independently, with some supervision by the district or state authorizers to ensure the schools are complying with education regulations and their charter agreements.

Like charter schools in general, virtual charter schools are expected to benefit from the procharter policy reforms ►



## Logging On to Learn

that many states are implementing so that they can qualify for federal Race to the Top funds.

Other full-time programs are not independent charters, but are created by districts or coalitions of districts.

About 175,000, a fraction of the nation's 55 million K12 students, attend school full-time online, the "Keeping Pace" report states. Although data on virtual schools aren't as plentiful as for regular schools, there are strong indications that full-time virtual education is becoming more popular. In Ohio, for example, enrollment in full-time virtual programs grew 13 percent between 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, reaching 27,037 students, according to the report.

And some states have created state virtual schools, which typically offer individual courses to students statewide but usually do not provide full-time programs. One exception is Florida Virtual School, which offers supplemental and full-time programs to districts.

### Makeup of Student Body

Virtual school advocates say the new model offers distinct advantages to certain students compared with their peers in traditional schools. For example, gifted students looking to work at their own pace are drawn to virtual schools, says Leslye Moraski Erickson, head of Wisconsin Virtual Academy, a charter school that is serviced by K12 Inc. Some virtual students didn't do well academically in a regular classroom, while other students are outstanding musicians or athletes who need flexible hours for practice or training. Other students had not felt safe at a traditional school due to bullying or social difficulties, virtual school advocates say. "The goal is to match the learning environment with the needs of the student," says Erickson, whose independently operated school serves about 400 K12 students statewide.

But virtual schooling is not for all students. The model requires parents to devote significant time to helping their children. And high school students are



*A seventh-grader at Commonwealth Connections Academy in Pennsylvania works on a science experiment with her mother overseeing the project. Her mother acts as a learning coach.*

expected to learn more independently, which requires self-discipline.

### Educational Management

Many virtual charter schools are affiliated with for-profit educational management companies, such as Connections Academy, K12 Inc., Edison, White Hat and Insight Schools. Such companies typically provide online and offline curricula, learning management systems, and educational materials that are shipped to the students'

### Parents as Learning Coaches

Parents in the full-time virtual school model become "learning coaches," especially in the early grades. They work with their children, both while the kids are on the computer and when they are offline doing activities like art projects, games or science experiments, and they make sure the kids are on task.

Meanwhile, teachers in many cases interact with students and parents via e-mail, chat, phone, or via live and

**"The goal is to match the learning environment with the needs of the student."**

—Leslye Moraski Erickson, head of school, Wisconsin Virtual Academy

homes. Charters provide laptops or desktops, microphone headsets, and free Internet service. The companies can take an even larger role by marketing the school, providing teachers, or training the school's own teachers in the online curriculum.

Although they may be authorized by local districts, many virtual charter schools can enroll students throughout the state, except for cases like in California, where the schools are limited to their host and adjacent counties.

recorded video sessions in which students equipped with microphone headsets can talk to their teachers and draw on the screen in a kind of "virtual whiteboard."

In addition to providing a parent orientation, Capistrano Connections Academy provides teaching guides to parents and holds periodic conferences between teachers and parents, according to Jonathan Horowitz, the principal of the school, which serves about 1,000 K12 students in five counties in Southern California. ►



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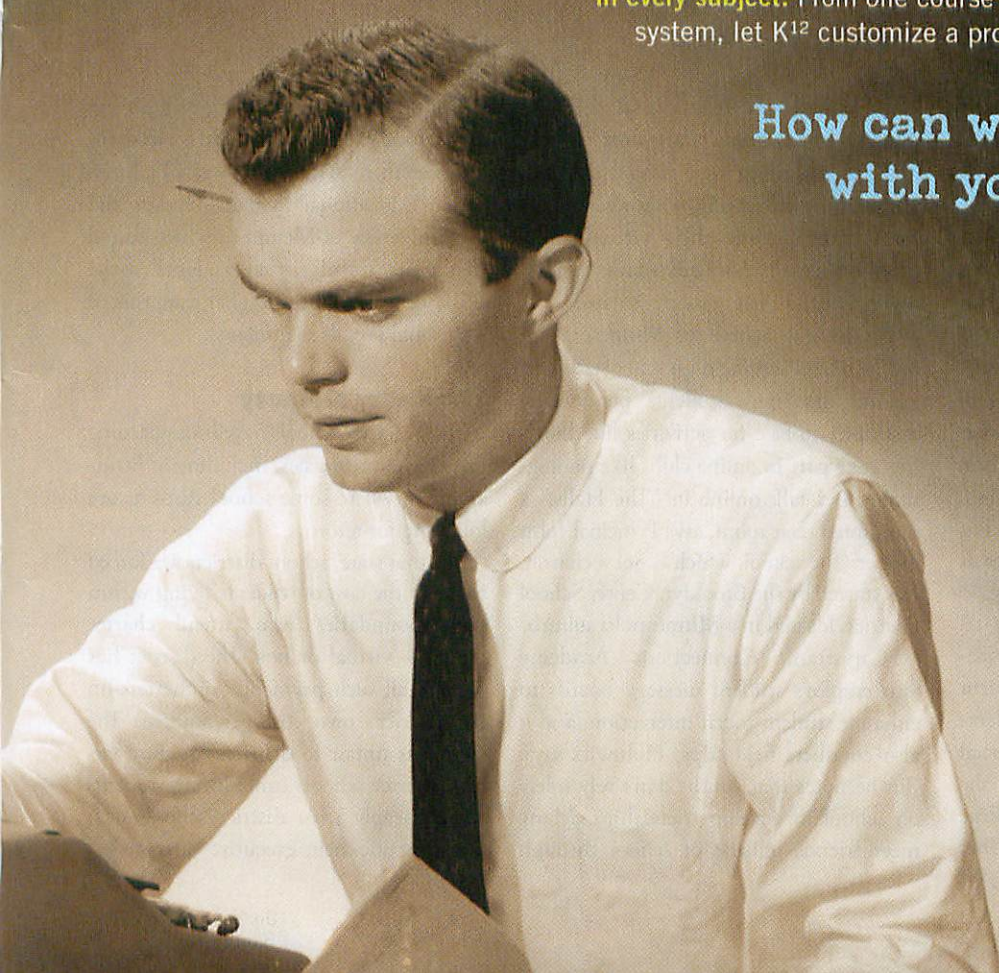
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In parent-directed virtual education, the quality of the curriculum becomes even more important, says Michael K. Barbour, an assistant professor of instructional technology at Wayne State University. "If the content isn't that good, then the education, in theory, is not going to be that good unless the parent makes up for it," he says.

There is also the risk that the virtual teacher serves more as a helpline with little proactive contact with the home, which can be considered glorified homeschooling, with the parent as teacher, he says.

In many cases, virtual schools get their curriculum from private educational management companies, which research and develop the curriculum.

## Uncertain Results

But do students in full-time virtual programs learn as well as those in regular schools? There has been little research on the success of virtual schooling for K12 students. When the U.S. Department of Education last year reviewed academic studies on online learning, it found that, on average, students in online learning situations performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. But the department noted that most of the studies focused on adults.

Although much of the research has focused on individual online courses rather than full-time virtual schools, evidence shows that students can learn just as well in an online environment as they can in a regular school, says Allison Powell, vice president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. "I think it's another way for kids to learn," she says. "And the research that has been done has said that students in the online class do as well or better in online schools as they do in traditional face-to-face classes."

At Connections Academy in San Clemente, Calif., a special education student in her previous school was bullied relentlessly, Horowitz says. Without the social pressures at Connections Academy, she has excelled and taken community college courses. This spring she will receive her

## 5 TRENDS IN ONLINE LEARNING

Though virtual learning is by no means new, it has spread into 45 of the 50 states, and Washington, D.C. In particular, those states have a state virtual school or online initiative, full-time online schools or both, according to the 2009 report, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*. Online learning offers innovative programs within school districts and internationally. They include:

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### 2. HOME SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE

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### 3. REMEDIAL OPTION

Perhaps the fastest growing trend in online learning, credit recovery has seen a substantial increase in popularity. Students seeking to recover credit from failed classes can enroll in classes through various companies and online schools.

### 4. INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Schools such as Chesapeake High School in Baltimore, Md., are employing video games and simulations to enhance student learning in an engaging way. Partnering with Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Laboratory, the high school has instituted a virtual reality classroom allowing students to study Mt. St. Helens in Washington without stepping off campus.

### 5. RETURNING STUDENTS

Working collaboratively with public school districts as well as charter schools, online learning companies have made it possible for students up until to their early 20s who have dropped out to earn the credit they need to receive their GED.

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diploma and associate of arts degree.

Even assuming that virtual students are learning effectively, what about their social lives outside their virtual classrooms? Virtual school advocates say it's a myth that their students are isolated.

At Insight School of Minnesota, an online school serving high school students around the state, students periodically meet face-to-face for activities like bowling, take part in online clubs like photography, and talk online in "The Halls," a monitored chat room, says Principal John Huber. The school, which is not a charter, was started by the Brooklyn Center School District, located in a Minneapolis suburb.

Capistrano Connections Academy also employs student message boards to enhance student social interaction, and it also conducts field trips, Horowitz says. But he notes that youths don't rely solely on school to develop friendships. Many meet friends outside of school through

clubs, sports or church, he adds. His opinion is confirmed in a 2008 study by Interactive Educational Systems Design and the University of Memphis, which found that measures of virtual students' social skills were the same or higher than that of a national sample of students.

## The Matter of Money

Virtual charter schools have brought some funding controversies, including in Pennsylvania, where some school districts are lobbying for reforms.

In that state, school districts are forced to cover the cost of students living within their boundaries who attend charter schools—virtual or not. The district has to base all such payments to charters on the district's own cost per student. The system is unfair to districts, because virtual charter schools can educate students more cheaply than district schools can, says Jim Buckheit, executive director ▶



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of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators. Virtual schools don't have transportation and facilities costs that traditional schools do, he notes. Virtual charters "are making a profit, because the amount that they are being reimbursed far exceeds the cost of the delivery of services," he says.

But virtual school advocates dispute that saying that while virtual charters save on facilities, their expenses are higher in other areas, including paying for technical and academic support, computers and Internet access for students.

### Joining the Game

As virtual schooling has become more popular, some districts have been looking to create their own virtual schools.

With some state grant money, Lawrence (Kan.) Public Schools in 2004 created its own virtual charter school to serve the needs of children whose parents felt they weren't a good fit for traditional schools, says Karen Vespestad, the district's director of grants, board services and strategic planning. Declining enrollment over the prior four years in the district, with 300 families homeschooling, was another reason, she says.

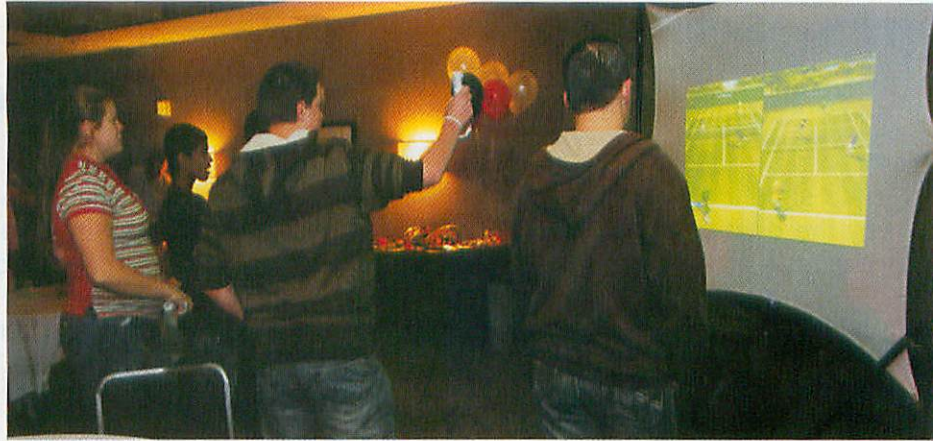
The Lawrence Virtual School, which uses K12 Inc., curriculum is now Kansas' largest, with about 1,100 K8 students.

Although the district doesn't receive any of the virtual school's per-pupil money, it does get to count the school's students in its district enrollment totals, Vespestad says. That's financially important, because some federal and state monies are based on district enrollment.

The district, which has about 10,000 students overall, hired the charter school's principal, OK'd the curriculum, and approves all expenses, but it gives freedom to the school to run its own affairs, Vespestad says. The school reports to the district's school board annually, she adds.

### Approving Independent Charters

The McFarland (Wis.) School District last year authorized the Wisconsin Virtual Academy because the district believed



*Students at the Insight School of Minnesota play a game of tennis on Nintendo Wii at the 2009 fall kick-off party, which allowed students to meet the teachers, counselors and fellow students.*

the virtual model could work for interested students, says Superintendent Scott Brown. The district also gets free access to the K12 Inc. online curriculum.

But what should districts look for when considering approving virtual charters? Virtual charter school applications present unique issues, including picking the method that will keep track of attendance and establishing student "seat time," says Alex Medler, vice president of policy and research at the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. District leaders should talk to officials at state agencies and leaders in other districts who have

ter petitioners plan to contract with an educational management company, district leaders should ask to inspect their agreement with the vendor to understand each party's role and responsibilities. For guidance, districts also could consult the "National Standards for Quality Online Programs" developed by the International Council for K-12 Online Learning.

The Capistrano Unified School District approved the application in 2003 from Capistrano Connections Academy after looking at for-profit Connection Academy's track record and student test scores in schools in other states, says

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—Jim Buckhiet, executive director, Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators

had experience with virtual charters to see what state laws or policies address that question and others, he adds.

Medler advises further that district leaders should ask how the school plans to show academic growth. Virtual charters often attract high-risk kids who move in and out of the regular public school system, making it difficult for the virtual charter to get high participation rates on state tests, he says. "You will want in most cases additional measures of student performance that you [and the charter] agree on as part of the contract," he says, noting nationally norm-referenced assessments.

The charter proposal also needs to address how the school will provide special education services to students living in different areas of the state.

Finally, Medler says, if virtual char-

Jolene Dougherty, the Capistrano district's administrator for charter schools.

### Unable to Ignore Growth

Dougherty, who is a nonvoting member of the virtual school's board of directors, advises district leaders who are considering authorizing virtual charters to consider the quality of the curriculum offered before they approve and to stay in touch with the school on a regular basis.

Overall, districts across the nation won't be able to ignore the growth of virtual learning, Dougherty says. "And as administrators," she adds, "we need to embrace them and accept them and look for quality programs." DA

*Kevin Butler is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.*